

5 Reasons Why Your Athletes Need a Hydration Plan

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There's no way to know *exactly* how much water each of us needs to consume daily (<https://learn.truesport.org/how-much-water-should-youth-athletes-drink/>). With varying levels of activity, finding the right balance of fluid intake for young athletes can seem like a guessing game. But, it's important to note that without a proper hydration plan, there are potential dangers (<https://learn.truesport.org/heat-illness-youth-sports/>) from both dehydration and the lesser known *over-hydration* that can be a matter of life and death. **So how can you help an athlete figure out the right hydration plan for themselves?**

Dr. Mitchell Rosner, a nephrologist with a clinical focus on fluid and electrolyte disorders, acute kidney injury, and polycystic kidney disease (PKD), has dedicated much of his work at the University of Virginia to studying the potentially fatal impacts of over-hydration in young athletes. According to Rosner, over-hydration is one of the most preventable and least understood problems that coaches face.

Many of us have spent most of our lives being told to make sure to drink more fluids (<https://learn.truesport.org/hydration-youth-athletes-faqs/>), but several deaths in marathon races and at football practices due to over-hydration prove that you can get too much of a good thing.

As we approach these hot summer months (<https://learn.truesport.org/fueling-young-athletes-summer/>), it's important to know how to spot the symptoms of over-hydration and how to help your athletes develop a plan to stay balanced with their hydration needs on and off the field.

Effects and Symptoms of Over-Hydration

Over-hydration can lead to hyponatremia, meaning too much water is consumed and an athlete's electrolyte balance is dangerously diluted. "People will feel bloated or have a bit of a headache or some nausea, but unfortunately, those are the same symptoms of dehydration," says Rosner.

"But if you've been drinking a lot, you should be able to know that you should stop drinking. Even then, it may be too late—your stomach is already full of water. The best thing to do is to try to avoid getting there," Rosner adds. And, if an athlete is experiencing these symptoms or displaying signs of confusion, you should seek medical attention immediately.

Dehydration v. Over-Hydration

"Dehydration in youth sports is relatively mild and rarely life-threatening (<https://learn.truesport.org/youth-athlete-heat-recovery/>), but water overload is absolutely life-threatening," says Rosner. While you should be urging your athletes to stay properly hydrated throughout the day, you shouldn't focus on filling them with gallons of water on game day. A few sips of water during most games or practices is usually all an athlete will need, adds Rosner. Remind athletes to sip when thirsty, but don't force them to consume a specific volume of water.

How to Gauge Hydration Needs

"If you just use thirst as a guide, that's the optimal way to gauge how much you need," says Rosner. "Thirst is an innate feeling, and rarely would someone *not* know that they're thirsty."

"There's a myth that if you're feeling thirsty, it's too late and you're already too dehydrated — but that's not the case," Rosner adds, and studies [support this assertion](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5334560/) (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5334560/). "It's rare a young athlete would ever get dehydrated in a baseball game or at cross-country practice," he says.

How You Can Help an Athlete Make a Plan

The best way to develop that plan, Rosner says, is by using the scale as a guide. "A good rule of thumb is that if you're gaining weight during an athletic activity, you're drinking too much. You shouldn't lose more than a few percent of your body weight — that indicates dehydration — but losing a little weight during exercise is fine. You can replace that after activity."

Weigh your athlete before and after a few practices to get a sense of how much weight they lose during activity. Ask how they feel and note both their weight and feelings. Keep a record, and eventually, patterns will emerge.

You'll be able to estimate how much your athlete should be drinking [during practices and in competition](https://learn.truesport.org/recovery-during-sports-tournaments/) (https://learn.truesport.org/recovery-during-sports-tournaments/). "If you feel lightheaded and you dropped weight, you need to drink more," says Rosner. "If you're feeling bloated, you're probably drinking too much."

Teach Self-Advocacy

Coaches may push fluids on athletes during a hot game or match, but each athlete needs to be able to [think for him or herself](https://learn.truesport.org/youth-sports-develop-ethical-men-women/) (https://learn.truesport.org/youth-sports-develop-ethical-men-women/). "That's very important — hydration is so individual, and everyone has different needs," says Rosner.

If a coach is [pushing athletes](https://learn.truesport.org/youth-sports-punishment-alternatives/) (https://learn.truesport.org/youth-sports-punishment-alternatives/) to drink a lot, it can be lethal. "There are cases of high school athletes following coaches' recommendations who died from over-hydration. Every year, we see fatalities, and the sad thing is, it's completely preventable," he adds.

Make sure your athlete knows that they can say no to chugging a water bottle after running a lap and can ask for a drink break if thirsty. Your athlete should [feel in control](https://learn.truesport.org/13-ways-develop-leadership-skills-youth-athletes/) (https://learn.truesport.org/13-ways-develop-leadership-skills-youth-athletes/) of their hydration plan — that's the key to developing an athlete who's successful in the long-term.

Rosner wants coaches to remember that "there's no calculation that's going to be perfect: people sweat at different levels, temperatures impact how much you sweat, how hard you work impacts how much you need to drink to replenish,"

Finding an [optimal hydration](https://learn.truesport.org/topics/hydration/) (https://learn.truesport.org/topics/hydration/) plan that works for each athlete will take a little bit of trial and error, but making sure your athletes are staying properly hydrated will not only help them perform at their best, but it will also ensure the safety of your team throughout the sport season.

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